ANGLICAN IDENTITY - AN EXPECTANT COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND MISSION

The Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops 1987

Whenever the House of Bishops shall put forth a Pastoral Letter, it shall be the duty of every Member of the Clergy having a pastoral charge to read it to his Congregation on some occasion of public worship on a Lord's Day, or to cause copies of the same to be distributed to the members of his Parish or Congregation, not later than one month after the receipt of the same. Canon III.15.2(F).

To our partners in faith, lay and ordained, in the Episcopal Church in the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Virgin Islands, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the American Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe:

Grace be unto you and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We, your bishops, greet you from the city of Chicago where we have engaged the present, celebrated the past and looked with hope into the future.

Gazing into the Past

The past compelled our attention because we celebrated the 100th anniversary of one of the great ecumenical proclamations of the Christian Church. The Episcopal House of Bishops, meeting in this same city in 1886, produced a document known as the Chicago Quadrilateral. Through these words the Episcopal Church issued a call to ecumenical unity at a time in Church history when exclusive and competing denominational claims were commonplace. This statement was among the first attempts by a major church in Christendom to separate the essential elements of our corporate life in Christ from the traditions that always gather around them. This document expressed a willingness by Episcopalians to forego all preferences of our own on the secondary matters of modes of worship, discipline, and customs if that could achieve unity in the body of Christ. Four essentials were set forth as the basis on which Christian unity might be established:

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1. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the revealed Word of God.

2. The Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith.

3. The two Sacraments -- Baptism and the Supper of the Lord -- ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution and of the elements ordained by Him.

4. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church.

(Book of Common Prayer, pp. 876-77)

The Chicago Quadrilateral is exciting to read even in 1987. It must have been breathtaking 100 years ago. We brought that part of our past into the present. As we worshiped in the same cathedral in which the original document was first adopted, our eyes were cast in both pride and humility upon our predecessors in office and in faith. We are the recipients of a goodly heritage.

This moment gave us a new awareness that we must act with a similar decisiveness and courage today if our descendants are to celebrate and remember our witness and be called by it into faithfulness in their own generation. That is how the communion of saints is built.

Episcopalians have been through some challenging days and rigorous years. In recent decades this Church of ours has begun the task of looking at its mission in terms of a vastly different world. We have edged away from our class consciousness and have opened our eyes to those victimized by our attitudes and our institutions. We have grown in our ability to understand our interdependence with all of the peoples of the world. We have awakened to a concern for our common environment. We have faced on differing levels the reality of our prejudices. We continue the exciting but arduous task of dialogue between the way we understand our faith and the stunning explosion of contemporary knowledge. We have poured great energy into the task of adapting our liturgy to reflect God's present action in history only to recognize that our liturgies change continuously as the people of God use them.

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We have participated in and witnessed the fresh breath of the Spirit evident in the renewal of the Church. We have watched the emergence of vital energy in prayer groups, Bible study, individual witnessing, and new focus for mission. There is power in our common life, a vision of a brighter future, and the willingness to put these apostolic gifts and exhilarating changes to work in the service of our Lord.

Every change, every transition, every new insight brings an experience of dislocation for some, and an experience of being finally included for others. No two of us ever move at exactly the same pace. As we have journeyed through recent decades, our Church has had pioneers and consolidators. We have had visionaries who propelled us into the future and traditionalists who wanted to make sure that the treasures of the past were properly valued. We now recognize that in the divine economy for a faithful community all of these points of view are gifts from God that we can celebrate. We believe that we are today a healthy, vibrant, balanced and, perhaps most importantly, an expectant Church.

Standing in the Present

This mood presents the opportunity that our Presiding Bishop sees and grasps so perceptively. He began his ministry in this office two years ago with a promise to listen and a commitment to the building of an inclusive faith community in which "there will be no outcasts." Listening and building inclusiveness will always be part of his ministry, but he is now prepared to lead, and this Church seems to us to be ready to join with him to welcome the future. As the servant of a Church that has vast reservoirs of power, Bishop Browning stated, "I am ready to press the connection between being in power and responding to the power of the Gospel."

Here in Chicago our Presiding Bishop has laid before us the mission imperatives that he hopes will guide the Church's mission during the years of his leadership.

These imperatives point to familiar activities that have sustained and nourished the Church for centuries. Words like servanthood, evangelism, community service, missionary activity, education for ministry, and shared faith have been made newly vital for us as they flow into a unified ministry. "Faith is mission," Bishop Browning asserted. The Church tells the story of God in Christ both when it acts and when it speaks. If one speaks of God's love but does not act out that love, or if one acts out that love without interpreting one's action, the fullness of our Gospel is violated. Word and action are two sides of the same coin; so are justice and proclamation, witness and service. There is no evangelism that does not work for justice and no work for justice that is not evangelism. The heart of the Gospel cannot be divided.

In powerful and moving phrases the Presiding Bishop said, "I deeply believe that without justice there will be no peace, liberty, or equality. Justice is the ultimate good, grounded in our biblical heritage and patently demonstrated in Jesus' ministry. No society can be too just, no individual can act more justly than is good for him or her or for others in the society. The Church must be the first, not the last, to point out and protest instances or institutions of injustice; racism, sexism, elitism, classism are social heresies that also violate our covenant with God, making them theological heresies. The passionate pursuit of justice is not extremism but virtue. Its fruits are liberty and equality. It should not be an accident that there is a relationship between Episcopalians in power and the Gospel."

This vision has stretched us to look at our mission not only nationally, but globally. The Gospel is the proclamation of the love of God, and justice is that love distributed. That insight informs our theological understanding and drives us into action.

"Have we left the care of the earth and all God's creatures great and small to the Sierra Club?" Bishop Browning asked. "Have we no sense of the theological implications of acid rain, deforestation, the loss of the ozone layer? Have we nothing to say to those engaged in genetic engineering?" These are searching questions. A church, that addresses these issues must know in a deep and pervasive way the Lord we serve. We must be equally aware that the message of the Church will not be heard

by the secular public unless we understand the nature, the intricacies, and the origins of contemporary realities. The ongoing dialogue between science and theology is a necessary facet of the Church's missionary imperative to which this century in particular demands response from modern Christians.

This world also compels the Church to expand the spirit of ecumenical dialogue to include interfaith dialogue. Christians must not ignore or caricature the other great faith traditions of the world as unworthy of our serious attention and engagement.

Other items that touch profoundly the lives of our people received our attention and concern. They ranged from the flash points of conflict around the world to the issues of debate within our own societies. We looked with seriousness at the subject of human sexuality, the pressures on the family, and the needs of those who live on the margins of economic life.

Addressing these issues responsibly and effectively is now the agenda before this Church on every level, national, diocesan, and parochial. We, your bishops, feel the call of God's Holy Spirit, the excitement of a new vision, and the joyful burden of this responsibility. We share these things with you, our brothers and sisters in the Church, because we want you to hear this call and make it your vision, your opportunity, and your joy. We will need to work in concert to move this Church to new levels of engagement with our world. We believe that the ordained and lay leadership within our Church has been graced and inspired for this task and that you, like us, are waiting to be called and empowered. We now issue the call and together we will seek the empowerment.

Looking into the Future

When our eyes turned toward the future, we focused on the General Convention and the Lambeth Conference in 1988 and our hopes beyond that for the Church as the body of Christ in the 21st century of its life. Perhaps it was that sweep in the mind's eye from the Chicago Quadrilateral in 1886 to the present moment of opportunity, to the upcoming Lambeth Conference in 1988 and to the years beyond, that caused us to look anew at what it means to be an Anglican. Our identity as Anglicans

has been brought to the attention of the world through such international Anglican Church leaders as Desmond Tutu and Terry Waite. The Lambeth Conference of 1988 will be attended by more Anglican bishops from the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America than from Europe and North America. The Anglican Church is no longer the Church of England. Her daughter Churches around the world have grown into sister Churches forming a unique faith family. There are more Anglicans in Uganda today than in the United States. Anglicans worship not just in English, but in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and a myriad of other languages and dialects. Those attending the Lambeth Conference of 1988 will have available to them simultaneous translations into five languages.

We have within our Anglican fellowship a wide variety of liturgical practices and local customs. We are quite willing to disagree on substantial issues and to allow an open process in which we seek to discern the truth of God. We encourage theological debate and pioneering thinking. We allow issues to be confronted, ethical standards to be challenged, and credal understandings to be argued. We have always welcomed a wide variety of theological perspectives in our Church. Members of this communion rely in differing degrees on Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as their authority. Slowly we are awakening to the realization that the boundaries of truth are wider than any of us has yet imagined.

A Church whose identity was long associated with a single nation had to become inclusive of a wide variety of people and practices. That Church is now a worldwide presence that requires us to embrace an even broader spectrum of life. Our claim is this: unity can be experienced without uniformity. Our belief is this: the Anglican Communion is living into a new and powerful definition of catholicity. We are in a very real sense a sign of the promise present in the true ecumenical spirit. The holy God, who is beyond the capacity of our human and finite minds to grasp, is fashioning a Church that is willing to lay aside all claims to the possession of infallible formulations of truth. God is instead fashioning a Church that will always be open to new insights, a Church that participates in the journey into God's purpose. We are becoming a community of faith that celebrates the God who creates all people and

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all things; the Christ who says "Come unto me all ye....". and the Holy Spirit who binds us into a fellowship where no barrier divides us one from another, and where, in profound awareness of human sin and in spite of human differences, we speak the universal language of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

The members of the Anglican Communion offer the world a Church that does not seek to impose unity by enforcing conformity. We offer the world a Church that dares to let unity develop by trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. A Church always in transition will look like chaos to some until its cohesive catholicity begins to dawn upon us even as it dawns within us. Then there will be revealed in us the inclusive community of the people of God.

"My friends, I have a vision of a missionary Church," our Presiding Bishop stated, "a Church that takes the issues of our time into the center of its life of faith." This is the vision we, your bishops, have glimpsed in our meeting together in Chicago. This is the vision we now offer you. We believe that, in responding to this vision, we can find our vocation afresh and begin with new vigor to call our world to justice, even as we call that world to the God whom we have met in Jesus Christ: to whom be glory in the Church and in the lives of all the faithful both now and for ever.

Amen